



Scott Brabant  
Board Chair

Luis B. Pérez, LCSW  
President & CEO

**Testimony before the Appropriations Committee, Health Subcommittee, regarding:**

**H.B. 5037 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTEENTH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.**

**Public Hearing  
Thursday, February 24, 2022 ~ 2:00 pm**

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. My name is Luis Perez and I wish to share comments in regards to H.B. 5037 An Act Concerning The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2023, And Making Appropriations Therefor.

I am President and CEO of Mental Health Connecticut (MHC), a 114-year-old nonprofit, and Chair of the board of The Alliance: The Voice of Community Nonprofits and serve on the Affiliate Relations committee and as Vice Chair of the Anti-Racism, Equity, and Social Justice committee for Mental Health America. I am here to express my concern on our state budget, and to explain how funding for essential community services, across the system of care, will impact the more than 1,000 people we serve daily, our dedicated staff, and the community partners who are critical to our work.

As a behavioral health provider, your commitment to increase funding by \$461 million is needed now more than ever as we are seeing an increase in the need for services. I have been encouraged to see the legislature's focus and attention on this crisis this year. But I want to be clear: **There is no way to address the gaps in the mental health system without addressing the chronic underfunding of the existing services provided by nonprofits.** This year, Connecticut is in a unique position to make significant investments that will have a lasting impact on improving the overall system of care in the state.

The Governor's proposed budget champions new behavioral health services and initiatives, for which we are supportive, but it does not provide support to existing programs that are struggling to keep up with the demand for services. **We urge the Appropriations Committee to fight for funding for these programs by implementing The Alliance's plan for a \$461 million increase.**



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As Connecticut continues to be siloed in its funding, please consider that MHC works within a complex system of care. One of the most debilitating consequences of funding cuts, is that when some of our fellow nonprofits face budget challenges it impacts our ability to do our best work. If other nonprofit agencies are subject to funding cuts, it creates an inability for all of us to work together to support our staff, recipients, and families. The result is that people pay by forfeiting an improved quality of life, and sometimes their life, especially if they are at risk of experiencing homelessness, not receiving care, or many of other vulnerable situations that any of us can find ourselves in.

Now, more than ever, Connecticut residents are paying attention to their mental health. This unique moment in time is an opportunity to create a vision for the behavioral health system across the life span, and to fund areas that allow for:

**PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION:** When mental health and substance use conditions are addressed through prevention and intervention, especially for youth and young adults, it will allow Connecticut to:

- increase early detection, save lives, and improve long-term health outcomes
- lower health care costs
- remove barriers that cause stigma and discrimination
- apply whole health approaches, from nutrition to collaborative care
- invest in peer support, community health care workers, and other models that increase access

**EQUITY:** It's time to address health equity and make structural decisions based on the [Social Determinants of Health](#). This requires Connecticut to work across systems, implement data-driven policy, identify where behavioral health outcomes intersect with oppression and racism, improve the quality of life for frontline workers, set up the human services sector for long-term success, and expand the delivery system in community-based care.

**FINISHING WHAT WE STARTED:** Given the experiences we've had in the past 2+ years, there is common ground understanding that all environments, from schools to workplaces to communities and homes, will improve if emotional and psychological safety mirror physical safety.

The following areas are basic concepts that have deep bi-partisan support but have been stuck in policy limbo for far too long. In 2022, we are calling for the following to forward:

- **Enforce private health insurance parity for Mental Health and Substance Use.** After the passage of the CT Parity law ([www.ctparitycoalition.org](http://www.ctparitycoalition.org)) in 2019, and 14 years after the federal law, compliance is still unknown and unconfirmed in many cases, yet consumer experiences of inequity in health care are prevalent and increasing. We ask that the legislature hold another public hearing in 2022 to shore up the 2019 bill and strategize for future compliance and enforcement.
- **Ensure peer support is an essential part of Connecticut's mental health workforce.** Peer support is an evidence-based practice of incorporating certified individuals with lived experience into clinical and non-clinical settings to support individuals on their path to recovery. In 2021,

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MHC supported the creation of a task force (which, to date, has not convened) to study reimbursement models. Creating a system that elevates the peer support workforce is essential to all future growth in this area, especially peer-run respites with trained Recovery Support Specialists.

The Governor's budget proposes several new programs for which we urge your support, including:

- Expanding Mobile Crisis services to be available 24/7 using ARPA funding, which will be important especially as the state rolls out 9-8-8
- 26 new community placements from CVH and Whiting
- Funding to place peer support specialists in Connecticut's 12 busiest hospitals. This will improve the connection to services of people who are hospitalized with a mental health crisis or who go to the emergency room. It is important to note, however, that this program will increase referrals to existing community programs, and increase in demand which is not funded in the proposed budget.

Now is the time to invest in systems change. Programs and services need to respond to our changing times and prepare for the wave of more behavioral health needs to continue to increase. Providers will continue to see an unprecedented high volume of people in crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic continues and fallout from pandemic fatigue will be experienced by all populations.

Community nonprofits are ready and able to support people struggling with mental health, but we need your help to ensure that current services are available and accessible.

The health and wellbeing of our friends and neighbors are at stake, as is the future of our state.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and for your continued service to Connecticut.

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